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SKYLINE FARMS

In the early days of the depression, state relief administrations often made grants of money or food to thousands of needy farm families, just as they did to the city unemployed. Many state relief officials soon realized, however, that handing out cash doles was not helping the low-income farmers to solve the basic problems which had forced them to seek relief.

The million farm families on relief were not facing conditions born solely of the depression; their problems had roots running back many years. Usually their land was too poor, their acreage was too small, their farming methods were backward and uneconomic. Most of them were tenants working under vague, oral leases. All of them were poor credit risks, who were usually unable to get the cash advances necessary to make a crop.

To help these families get off relief and back on their own feet, the idea of rehabilitation was developed by a few far-sighted local relief administrators to replace cash grants. Under the rehabilitation program, needy farmers were to get not only loans to enable them to buy the equipment and stock they needed but also technical aid in farm and home management to make sure that the money was wisely used. They were to be given the tools and training to go ahead by themselves.

The idea spread rapidly from Texas and Alabama, where it originated, to all parts of the nation. In April, 1934, the Federal Government officially recognized rehabilitation as the soundest method of rural reconstruction, and allotted relief money to the states for this purpose. In most states rural rehabilitation corporations were set up to handle the work, using funds granted to them by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

In some areas it was found impossible to rehabilitate many families which were living on worn-out, submarginal farms. Therefore, the state rehabilitation corporations began to develop different types of resettlement projects, where these families could get a new start on good land with a better chance to succeed. It was to give such an opportunity to distressed farm families in Jackson County, Alabama, that the community now known as Skyline Farms was started late in 1934.

Jackson County had about eight small industries, including hosiery mills, cotton mills, lumber manufacturers and an underwear factory, which had provided work for a good many of the families which had migrated to the towns from the farm. As these industries laid off their employees and closed down during the depression, the workers had to return to the farm — in most cases a worn-out farm with a shanty that had not been lived in for years, and which had no heating, lighting, or sanitary facilities. Since these families had earned only a meager living while they were employed, they usually had accumulated no savings to fall back on. Sickness, malnutrition and suffering became widespread, both in families which had

returned to the farm after losing their jobs, and also among sharecropper and tenant families which had never left the land. By 1934, at least 1,000 families in Jackson County, most of them farm families, were on the relief rolls.

Moving Up To Live

To help some of these families get a new start, the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation searched the county for a tract of land large enough to organize a new settlement, and which could be purchased at a reasonable price. Such a tract was found in a plateau on Cumberland Mountain, which rises above Jackson County's lowlands about 16 miles northwest of Scottsboro, the county seat and nearest shipping center. On this plateau the Corporation optioned 8,040 acres of land with the privilege of purchasing it within three years at from \$5.00 to \$7.50 per acre.

At Cumberland Mountain Farms, as the new project was first called, the corporation planned to resettle about 200 families. Some, it was planned, would farm full-time, while others would do part-time or subsistence farming, to supplement their incomes from jobs in some industry which would be brought into the community. Various cooperative facilities were also planned to increase the homesteaders' income.

The project was begun on December 14, 1934, by a group of nine men selected from relief rolls. Overalls, shirts, and food were obtained for them from surplus commodities, and a barracks and kitchen were built on the project site, so the men could stay on the job instead of going to and from their homes each day.

By January, 1935, approximately 50 men had been drawn from relief rolls to work at Cumberland Mountain. The men earned food and a credit on the purchase of a new home, but they did not earn cash to send back to wives and children who had remained at home. In the early part of the spring, it was thought best not to keep the families separated until permanent homes could be provided and almost overnight a shanty town sprang up.

All of the families selected for occupancy (except a few transferred from the Coffee County homestead project in southeastern Alabama) were rural families taken from the county relief rolls. Most of them had lived in the mountains for generations, handicapped by poor land, low incomes, and poor diet. Nearly half of the families needed relief because of poor farm conditions (many operated farms too small to provide a living); a third of the families needed relief because of poor farm management or lack of training; and about 15 percent were destitute as a result of illnesses and physical handicaps.

Only five of the families reported no outstanding indebtedness; none reported savings and only a few had life insurance. Nearly all of the families had children, with the age of husbands ranging from 17 to 80 years, that of wives from 16 to 64 years. Seventy percent of the parents, however, were under 40 years of age and nearly half of the children were less than 6 years old. The amount of time elapsed since family heads had steady jobs varied up to six years, and the steady jobs when held seldom provided adequate income. The average wage of 33 men who reported earnings in dollars and cents was \$6.23 per week, with only two reporting earnings of \$15 or more.

None of the families had less than five years of farm experience, although half of the family heads had done work other than farming, mostly lumber, mill and mining work, well drilling, truck driving and unskilled labor. Nearly all of the farmsteads which they had previously occupied were very inadequate, and a great many of them had no outbuildings at all.

Man and the Forest

Only 170 acres in the Cumberland plateau tract had been cleared and put under cultivation at the time the new settlers arrived. The rest was covered with hardwood timber, so the families literally had to carve their homes out of the forest. Like their pioneer ancestors, these men and women began to build their new homesteads out of a wilderness.

Plans and specifications were laid down for the construction of the homes, but very little cash was available for building supplies. The men had been used to trading butter and eggs for flour, sugar and coffee; and they saw no reason why the raw materials they had, such as trees and stone, could not be bartered for nails, windows, doors, etc. A sawmill was borrowed and the men cut trees, sawed cross ties and traded them for building supplies.

Fortunately, the area chosen for their future homes was rich in natural resources. Oak, poplar and gumwood were plentiful, and a quarry on the project supplied several different types of stone for flagging floors. Also available nearby was limestone, a pit of 98 percent Silica sand, and banks of rock for road construction. All fireplace and chimney stone was shaped at the quarry and delivered as a unit to the house sites.

Gradually the community took shape. Out of the forest there appeared trim, one-story frame houses of three, four or five rooms. Though modest in design, each house was roomy and well proportioned, and equipped with a cooking range, kitchen sink, cabinets and an ice box. A barn, smoke house, hog house, poultry house, fencing and an orchard were included in each farmstead unit. Water was supplied by individual wells 70 feet deep, with

hand pumps, pressure tanks and well houses, and sewage disposal was taken care of through individual septic tanks and sanitary privies.

At the heart of the development a community center was laid out on the main road leading to Scottsboro. Here the settlers built a store which was to be run cooperatively. Here, too, a modern, 10-room school building was erected and the community office and post office were set up.

About 25 miles of roads were built and surfaced with crushed limestone produced on the site. In addition, eight miles of county roads which already ran through the area were graded, ditched, surfaced, repaired, and improved with bridges and culverts.

Skyline Farms -- A New Town

When the FERA's rural rehabilitation program was transferred to the newly created Resettlement Administration in the summer of 1935, the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation adopted a resolution vesting exclusive management and control of Cumberland Mountain Farms in the new agency. In February, 1936, the Resettlement Administration approved a budget to complete the project. A little later the name of the project was changed to Skyline Farms, and it was decided to provide for fewer units than originally planned, in order to give a larger acreage to each family. In 1937 supervision was transferred to the Farm Security Administration, when that agency succeeded the Resettlement Administration. The same year negotiations were begun for the purchase of an additional 4,947 acres of land for the project. When the purchase was completed in 1938, it brought the total acreage of Skyline Farms to 12,987, representing a total land cost of \$96,123.

At the present time 155 units have been completed and plans have been made for 26 more, making a total of 181 units. All of the houses on the project are occupied, with more than 800 people in residence. Through June, 1940, a total of more than \$782,000 had been spent or encumbered on Skyline Farms for land, development and operations by the Farm Security Administration. About \$349,000 was spent by earlier agencies.

Thirty-two of the farm units, ranging in size from 56 to 124 acres, have been sold to homesteaders under long-term contracts. The average selling price was \$2,662.16. Payments are spread over 40 years and carry 3 percent interest. The average annual payment amounts to \$129.78 per family. This does not include taxes and insurance.

There are 18 "subsistence units" ranging in size from 2 to 12 acres and renting for from \$4 to \$10 per month. The remaining units are family-size farms averaging about 40 acres in size, for which the homesteaders pay an annual cash rent of from \$40 to \$100, most of the rents amounting to

about \$50. It is planned that these farms also will be sold as soon as the homesteaders have proved their ability to make good.

Farming at Skyline

Chief emphasis in the farm plans of Skyline families has been laid on a "live-at-home" program. Orchards have been set out, and every family has a garden, so that it can produce most of the food it uses. Nearly all the families own pressure cookers for canning.

Although the farm program got off to a slow start because land had to be cleared and residents were engaged in construction work, by 1938 the families canned an average of 450 quarts of fruits and vegetables. Each family now cans an average of about 500 quarts a year. A subsistence live-stock program has also been started, with hogs as a source of cash income as well as home food. At first, poultry was raised only for home use, but some of the homesteaders have been so successful that they have gone into commercial production, raising broilers for the early spring market.

The topography of the Skyline area, 1,680 feet above sea level, is mostly flat, or slightly rolling, with a small percentage of steep land on the border of the plateau. All of the land is subject to some erosion, which has been controlled by terracing, contour cultivation and cover crops. The prevailing soil type is DeKalb sandy loam which warms early and cultivates easily, the average length of the growing season being 206 days.

Cash crops at Skyline are varied, Irish potatoes and cotton being the principal ones. In 1939 about 25 carloads of choice Irish potatoes were shipped out. As the homesteaders learned more about the growing, harvesting and marketing of truck crops, they started raising tomatoes, cabbage, beans and carrots. Markets for these products have been established with stores in Atlanta, Birmingham and Huntsville, and some produce has been sent as far as Ohio.

Two years ago the farmers started to plant improved Puerto Rico sweet potatoes, which are stored in a curing plant for future seed and marketing. A sirup plant has encouraged the growing of cane. The "Maltose" method of sirup-making which was developed by the Extension Service of the Department of Agriculture has guaranteed a good price for this product.

The Use of Cooperatives

One of the principal advantages of living in a well-knit community is that the families can save time and money by working together in many

cooperative activities. This is particularly true of Skyline Farms. Because of this isolation, the people naturally developed a number of services and enterprises to make their community complete and self-supporting.

In May, 1936, the Cumberland Farms Cooperative Association was formed under the laws of the State of Alabama as a non-profit corporation without capital stock. Membership in the association was open to all producers in the territory served by it, upon the payment of a \$1 membership fee.

The co-op began operations in January, 1937, when it received an advance on a loan of \$15,000 from the Federal Government. The association took over and operated the Cumberland Mountain Farms store, which had been set up by the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. It bought provisions and sold them to Skyline residents at cost, plus 10 percent operating charges.

The association soon branched out into other fields of activity. It purchased and marketed farm products for members; it managed a workshop, garage, blacksmith shop and canning plant; it operated a livestock service for members; and it developed an informal health association to provide the homesteaders with medical care. Early in 1938 the name of the organization was changed to Skyline Farms Cooperative Association.

In order to establish additional cooperative facilities, another organization, the Skyline Farms Homestead Association, was incorporated in May, 1937, as a non-stock membership corporation. The government made this association a loan of \$27,300 to enable it to start the following services: a cotton gin and seed house, general warehouse, potato curing house and storage warehouse, sirup mill, machine shop and garage, feed and grist mill, canning plant, and marketing shed.

The new Homestead Association constructed and equipped the buildings necessary to carry on these activities. The original co-op leases the buildings and equipment from the Homestead Association, and manages and operates the facilities for all members of both associations.

Industry at Skyline

Since the beginning it was planned that some industry would be located at Skyline Farms, so that the homesteaders could supplement their farm income with part-time jobs.

In 1938 an agreement was reached with the Dexdale Hosiery Mills of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, for the operation of a silk-throwing plant and hosiery mill at Skyline. Homesteaders formed the Skyline Industrial Company, a cooperative association, which borrowed \$490,000 from the government.

Out of this fund the association spent \$139,700 for the purchase of a factory site and the erection of the plant, including all permanent fixtures. The budget calls for \$248,000 for knitting and throwing equipment, of which \$193,000 had been expended up to May, 1940. The association has title to all the physical property, with the government investment safeguarded by mortgages.

An operating company, owned jointly by the homesteaders' industrial association and Dexdale, supervised the construction and is now directing the plant's operations. It has a 45-year lease on the plant and equipment and will pay rentals on the plant sufficient to cover all payments to the government, plus all taxes, cost of maintenance, depreciation and insurance. The association and Dexdale each subscribed to \$50,000 of stock in the operating company, Dexdale to own 51 percent and the association 49 percent. Dexdale provides management services and markets the entire output of the plant. Hosiery is knit at the plant and then sent to Lansdale for finishing.

Two rules were followed in the location of this industry at Skyline: (1) Dexdale had an established outlet for its goods and a good reputation for production and merchandising; (2) the plant was a new industry, which did not take work away from any other locality. The Dexdale company gave assurance that the plant would not affect its other operations in Lansdale. Actually, the establishment of the new mills on government projects amounted to nothing more than a normal expansion of the Dexdale company's operations.

Homesteaders and members of their families are given preference in the selection of workers for the plant. Since they were not skilled in the operation of plant equipment, several small groups have gone to Lansdale at different times for a period of training. As they return they instruct other homesteaders in the work.

By March 1940 there were 40 people employed at the plant at an average monthly wage of \$74.51. The total payroll for that month amounted to \$3,252.76. After more of the homesteaders receive training and are able to perform the work, the plant will employ approximately 100 people with a monthly payroll of about \$10,000.

